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EPIGRAPHS AND EMPIRES: DECIPHERING HISTORY THROUGH INSCRIPTIONS OF THE SATAVAHANA EMPIRE

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Abstract :

Inscriptions are the most durable archive of early Indian polities, especially in the Deccan where literary sources are fragmentary. This paper examines the Satavahana Empire, c. 1st century BCE to 3rd century CE, through its epigraphic record to reconstruct patterns of administration, fiscal policy, trade regulation, and social integration. Analysing 45 major Prakrit inscriptions from Naneghat, Nashik, Karle, Junnar, Kanheri, Amaravati, and Sannati, the study identifies four recurring features. First, donative epigraphs functioned as instruments of political legitimacy and public communication. Second, systematic transfer of revenue rights to Buddhist monastic orders and Brahmin settlements operated as a form of decentralised service delivery. Third, institutionalised partnerships with shreni, or guilds, enabled banking, infrastructure, and welfare endowments. Fourth, multicultural patronage served as a strategy for managing trade corridors. Three detailed case notes—on Ushavadata's Nashik Cave No. 3 inscription, Gautami Balashri's Nashik prasasti, and the Karle inscription of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi—demonstrate how quantified public works, tax exemptions, and endowment terms were publicised as state performance. Methodologically, the paper combines epigraphic textual analysis with archaeological and numismatic context, read through a public administration lens. Findings indicate that Satavahana governance operated through negotiated authority, fiscal devolution, and transparency-by-inscription rather than a centralised bureaucracy. The epigraphic record shows that disclosure enabled delegation, asset-based grants sustained services, and fiscal pluralism secured social cohesion along trade routes. While the monarchical context limits direct replication, these ancient practices provide a usable past for debates on federalism, public-private partnership, and participatory administration in India.

Keywords: Satavahana, Inscriptions, Epigraphy, Ancient Administration, Donative Grants, Guilds, Decentralisation, Deccan, Public Works, Trade

Introduction :

The Satavahanas, designated as "Andhras" in the Puranas, controlled the Deccan, western coast, and parts of central India for nearly four centuries. Their reign bridges the Mauryan and Gupta periods, yet they left no administrative compendium comparable to Kautilya's Arthashastra. Reconstructing Satavahana statecraft therefore depends on material evidence: coins, urban archaeology, and most critically, inscriptions.

Over 150 Satavahana-era epigraphs survive, incised in Prakrit using the Brahmi script. They appear on the walls of rock-cut chaityas and viharas, on free-standing pillars, on copper plates, and on the rims of relic caskets. These texts record donations of villages, land, money, wells, caves, and even ferry services. Far from being mere religious acts, each donative inscription is a public policy document. It specifies donors, beneficiaries, assets transferred, tax status, boundaries, witnesses, and penalties for violation. In a pre-printing age, the inscribed rock face functioned as a gazette, court order, and audit report combined.

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This paper reads Satavahana inscriptions as evidence of administrative practice. The central proposition is that the Satavahana state governed through inscriptional governance: it publicised fiscal compacts, delegated revenue, and built legitimacy by carving commitments into stone. Such a model has three distinctive traits. Authority was negotiated rather than imposed, with kings sharing fiscal space with monasteries, guilds, and local chiefs. Transparency was architectural, because tax exemptions were literally set in stone for public verification. Infrastructure was co-produced, as rulers, merchants, and monastic orders jointly financed roads, tanks, and rest-houses along the Dakshinapatha trade route.

Understanding this system matters beyond ancient history. India's contemporary administrative challenges—fiscal devolution, infrastructure financing, and pluralism management—find early analogues in Satavahana practice. By deciphering inscriptions as acts of governance, this study contributes to a longer genealogy of Indian public administration, one in which delegation, disclosure, and partnership predate modern vocabulary.

The paper proceeds in seven sections. Section 2 states objectives. Section 3 reviews historiography on Satavahana epigraphy and identifies gaps. Section 4 outlines methodology. Section 5 classifies and analyses major inscriptions under themes of legitimacy, revenue, guilds, and works. Section 6 presents three detailed case notes. Section 7 discusses the findings and embeds the former "implications" into continuous analysis. Section 8 concludes.

Objectives of the Study :

- To prepare a functional typology of Satavahana inscriptions based on issuer, beneficiary, and administrative content.
- To analyse how donative epigraphs structured fiscal relations between the king, religious institutions, guilds, and localities.
- To examine the role of inscriptions in legitimising Satavahana rule across a multi-linguistic, multi-religious Deccan.
- To assess the extent of administrative centralisation versus decentralisation in the Satavahana polity.
- To extract governance heuristics from Satavahana epigraphic practice relevant to fiscal federalism, public-private partnership, and transparency.

Review of Literature

Foundational Epigraphic Work

The academic study of Satavahana inscriptions began with Bhagwanlal Indraji's readings of Nashik cave texts in the 1880s, followed by Rapson's Catalogue of the Coins of the Andhra Dynasty (1908). Sircar's Select Inscriptions (1942) provided reliable transliterations and translations, classifying records into royal, private, and donative types. Mirashi's History and Inscriptions of the Satavahanas (1981) remains the most comprehensive corpus, with detailed notes on palaeography and genealogy.

Political and Dynastic History

Scholars debated Satavahana chronology through inscriptions. The Naneghat inscription of Naganika established the dynasty's early presence in the western Deccan c. 1st century BCE. Later, the Nashik and Karle

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records of Gautamiputra Satakarni and Vashishthiputra Pulumavi provided synchronisms with the Western Kshatrapas, enabling a relative framework. Bhandare (2006) used coin legends and inscriptional titles to argue for a corporate rather than purely monarchical conception of Satavahana kingship.

Economic and Trade History

Ray (1994) integrated inscriptions with archaeology to link Satavahana prosperity to Indo-Roman trade. Donations at Sopara, Kalyan, and Bharuch indicate merchant participation in cave endowments. Chakravarti (2001) highlighted inscriptions mentioning shrenis at Junnar and Nashik, arguing that guilds functioned as banks and trustees.

Administrative and "Feudal" Debate

Shastri (1998) interpreted land-grants to Brahmins and monasteries as the beginning of "Indian feudalism," with the state alienating revenue and coercive power. Thapar (2002) modified this view, noting that grants did not create serfdom but delegated local administration. Singh (2008) emphasised the redistributive logic: kings gained merit and legitimacy, while donees provided social services.

Gaps in Public Administration Perspective

Despite rich historiography, few studies explicitly use public administration concepts to read Satavahana epigraphs. Questions of accountability, service delivery, and public communication remain implicit. This paper addresses that gap by treating inscriptions as administrative artifacts and analysing them with modern governance categories such as delegation, transparency, stakeholder management, and performance reporting.

Methodology

Data Collection
Primary data consist of 45 published Satavahana-era inscriptions from Epigraphia Indica Vols. VIII, X, XVII, XVIII; Luders' List of Brahmi Inscriptions; and Mirashi (1981). Sites include Naneghat, Nashik Pandu Lena, Karle, Bhaja, Kanheri, Junnar, Amaravati, Sannati, and Nagarjunakonda.

Analytical Framework
Each inscription is coded on five variables:
Issuer Category: Satavahana king, queen, prince, official, Shaka subordinate, private merchant, guild, monk.
Beneficiary Category: Buddhist sangha, Brahmin individual, Brahmin group, guild, village community, deity.
Asset Type: Village, field, cash, cave, cistern, pillar, coconut grove, ferry right, tax share.
Fiscal Clause: akaradayika (tax-free), abhatapadapesha (no entry of troops), alavanakhadaka (no salt monopoly), arathasavinayika (no forced labour).
Public Good Clause: Construction of roads, tanks, rest-houses, planting of trees, free ferries, feeding of monks.

Interpretation
The study uses comparative textual analysis within political, economic, and religious context. Archaeological data on settlement patterns and trade routes are mapped against inscriptional clusters. Public administration theories of principal-agent relations, common pool resources, and information asymmetry inform interpretation.

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Limitations

Chronology of Satavahana kings is not absolute; dates are approximate. Many inscriptions are damaged, and some grants are palimpsests. The sample excludes undeciphered or unpublished minor graffiti. The study does not engage in new palaeographic dating.

Satavahana Epigraphs: Themes of Governance

Genealogy, Ritual, and Legitimacy: Naneghat and Nashik Prasastis

The Naneghat inscription, c. 70–60 BCE, of Queen Naganika, widow of Satakarni I, is the earliest royal Satavahana record. Cut beside life-size relievo figures, it lists the performance of agnyadheya, vajapeya, and two ashvamedha sacrifices, and gives the gotra, family, and achievements of the king. In terms of administration, the inscription served three functions. First, public genealogy established dynastic continuity in the absence of court chronicles. Second, ritual claims positioned the Satavahanas within Brahminical political theology, which was essential for revenue from agrahara villages. Third, the location on a trade pass linking Junnar to the Konkan addressed merchants and local chiefs who used the route.

Gautamiputra Satakarni's Nashik prasasti, c. 125 CE, elaborates this practice. He is called ekabamhana, khatiya-dapa-mana-madana, and "destroyer of Shakas, Yavanas, and Pahlavas." The inscription was not mere boasting. It was a policy statement to western Deccan stakeholders after defeating Nahapana. It announced restoration of varna order and protection of trade, which were core public goods.

Fiscal Decentralisation through Religious Grants

Of 45 inscriptions analysed, 28 record transfer of fiscal rights. The typical formula grants a village or field "with udranga and uparikara," that is, with land-tax and additional cesses, to a sangha or Brahmin. Three clauses recur. Abhatapadapesha meant royal troops and officials could not enter, which prevented extraction and billeting and created a zone of local autonomy. Alavanakhadaka indicated that the state salt monopoly did not apply, so the donee could produce or sell salt, a major commodity. Arathasavinayika prohibited forced labour or corvée for state projects.

The Karle Cave Inscription of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi, c. 150 CE, grants village Karajaka to the Valuraka sangha with all three immunities. A king would forego revenue for three administrative reasons. First, monasteries maintained tanks, roads, and rest-houses, so the state outsourced infrastructure operations and maintenance to donees. Second, in a Buddhist-mercantile landscape, royal patronage purchased ideological support and trade security. Third, collecting tax from scattered hamlets was expensive, so alienation saved administrative overhead. This pattern represents fiscal federalism by grant. It resembles modern tied devolution where higher government assigns revenue streams to panchayats or parastatals for specific services.

Guilds as Financial and Administrative Intermediaries

Western Deccan inscriptions reveal shrenis of potters, weavers, bamboo-workers, oil-millers, and corn-dealers. They appear in three roles. As donors, guilds excavated caves or erected pillars, for example "the shreni of Dhenukakata" at Karle. As trustees, Ushavadata's Nashik inscription records a permanent endowment of 2,000 karshapanas invested with a weavers' guild at Govardhana, and 1,000 with another guild. Interest funded robes and meals for monks. The guilds were thus perpetual fund managers, with the cave text as the trust deed. As regulators, Junnar inscriptions mention guilds guaranteeing weights and measures, a state function delegated to trade bodies.

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Satavahanas lacked a salaried bureaucracy to manage endowments. Guilds, with reputational capital and local knowledge, solved the principal-agent problem. This anticipates modern self-regulation and escrow models in infrastructure finance.

Public Works and Performance Records

Unlike Mauryan edicts that are normative, many Satavahana inscriptions are performance reports. Ushavadata, a Shaka feudatory, lists 16 villages given to gods and Brahmins, 300,000 cows donated, 8 Brahmin marriages funded, and ghats, wells, tanks, and rest-houses built. He also established free ferry service on six rivers. The numbers are specific, verifiable, and located.

Gautami Balashri records in Nashik Cave No. 3 that her son restored the glory of the Satavahana family and stopped intermixture of varnas. She also notes field boundaries and water channels gifted. These texts are asset registers in stone. Functionally, such inscriptions achieved accountability because publicising works deters false claims and invites social audit. They encouraged competition, as successive donors tried to outdo predecessors, increasing public goods supply. They also ensured continuity, because future officials could not easily revoke quantified grants without visible violation.

Multicultural Patronage as Trade Policy

Satavahana epigraphs show simultaneous support to Buddhism, Brahminism, and local deities. Amaravati stupa records donations by kings, queens, merchants, and even Yavana, or Greek, devotees. Kanheri inscriptions mention a Yavana donor named Dhamma. Nashik records grants to both bhikkhu-sangha and Brahmana-agrahara.

This was economic strategy. The Dakshinapatha connected Ujjain to Pratishthana to Tagara to Amaravati. Traders included Buddhists, Jains, Brahmins, and foreigners. By funding all groups, Satavahanas reduced transaction costs of trust and conflict along the route. In governance terms, fiscal pluralism functioned as economic integration.

Case Notes

Case Note 1: Ushavadata's Nashik Cave No. 3 Inscription, c. 120 CE

Ushavadata was son-in-law of the Western Kshatrapa Nahapana. After Gautamiputra Satakarni defeated Nahapana c. 125 CE, Ushavadata switched allegiance and continued as a Satavahana subordinate in the Nashik region. His inscription is thus a document of political realignment.

The Prakrit inscription records gift of 300,000 cows to Brahmins and pilgrims, gift of 16 villages to gods and Brahmins, construction of quadrangular rest-houses, ghats, and tanks at Bharukachha, Dashapura, Govardhana, and Soparaka, and establishment of free ferry service on Ibha, Parada, Damana, Tapi, Karabena, and Dahanuka rivers. It also notes endowment of 70,000 karshapanas with guilds for perpetual funding of 20 monks' robes and meals, and grant of 32,000 coconut trees in Nanangola to charitable causes.

The inscription reveals several administrative logics. Cows and coconut trees are productive assets. Their yield funds welfare without recurring budget allocation, which is an early corpus fund model. Six rivers on the Bharuch-Nashik route were chokepoints. Free ferries removed private tolls, reduced time, and integrated the interior Deccan with the coast, representing a supply-chain intervention. Investing cash with weavers' guilds

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uses community institutions as banks. The inscription fixes interest use, creating earmarked expenditure, a form of outcome budgeting. By recording service to both Brahmins and Buddhists, and by continuing works after regime change, Ushavadata demonstrated loyalty to the new Satavahana order and to local society. The cave wall became a billboard of compliance.

Case Note 2: Gautami Balashri's Nashik Prasasti, c. 132 CE
This inscription was commissioned by Gautami Balashri, mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni, after her son's death and during the reign of her grandson Vashishthiputra Pulumavi. It is engraved in Cave No. 3 at Nashik and serves as both obituary and administrative record.

The text praises Gautamiputra as the restorer of Satavahana glory, the uprooter of Shakas, and the protector of varna order. It then records that he gave 100,000 cows to Brahmins, reclaimed fields, and built water channels. The queen-mother donates the village Pisajipadaka to the resident monks, with full tax immunity and defined boundaries.

The administrative content is significant. First, the inscription establishes intergenerational continuity. By having the queen-mother issue the grant, the dynasty signals stable succession and honours the deceased king's policy. Second, the grant's boundary description and immunity clauses are precise, which limited future disputes and enabled local monks to plan irrigation. Third, the praise section functions as a policy manifesto, communicating that the state will protect trade, suppress banditry, and maintain social order. The inscription thus combines performance legacy, legal deed, and political communication in one text. It shows how Satavahana governance used family authority and public display to sustain legitimacy across reigns.

Case Note 3: Karle Cave Inscription of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi, c. 150 CE
The great chaitya at Karle contains multiple donative records. One major inscription of Vashishthiputra Pulumavi, regnal year 24, grants the village Karajaka to the monks of Valuraka, or Karle. The grant specifies that the village is given with its taxes, with no entry of royal officers, with no disturbance, and with rights to all income.

This case illustrates the mature form of Satavahana fiscal decentralisation. The king transfers a complete revenue unit to a monastery located on the Borghat trade route. The monastery maintained the Karle chaitya, a major halting point for caravans between the coast and Junnar. By alienating Karajaka, the state ensured that the sangha had funds to repair the cave, provide water, and host travellers. In effect, the grant converted tax revenue into infrastructure maintenance without direct state expenditure.

The inscription also names a local official, the amacha, who executed the order, and it threatens punishment for violation. This indicates that even delegated grants retained a layer of royal oversight. The Karle case therefore shows a balanced model. The state devolved fiscal authority to reduce its own administrative load, but it retained legal supremacy and enforcement capacity. The durability of the Karle complex into the medieval period suggests the model worked.

Discussion

The Satavahana epigraphic record demonstrates a model of governance that relied on negotiation rather than central command. The state did not maintain a vast salaried bureaucracy visible in inscriptions. Instead, it issued

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charters that created local fiscal jurisdictions such as monasteries, Brahmin settlements, and guilds. These entities collected revenue, maintained order, and provided public goods. The king retained overarching sovereignty, military power, and the right to confirm grants. This arrangement can be described as governance by contract rather than command. In large, diverse geographies, states can extend reach by sharing fiscal space with legitimate non-state actors, provided terms are public.

Inscriptions made fiscal compacts common knowledge. A tax-exempt village's status was not hidden in a palm-leaf file but engraved at the village entrance or cave. This had two effects. It deterred future officials from illegal extraction, and it allowed beneficiaries to appeal to the inscription as legal evidence. Durable, public disclosure is a low-tech accountability mechanism. Digital dashboards today serve the same function that rock faces did.

Infrastructure under the Satavahanas was co-financed. Cave complexes at Karle, Bhaja, and Nashik were not built by the state alone. Kings donated land, queens donated pillars, merchants donated facades, and guilds donated cisterns. Inscriptions list each contribution. This created a reputational market for public goods. Donors competed for merit and social capital. Mixed financing with public recognition can mobilise private capital for infrastructure and reduce fiscal burden.

The Deccan was home to Mahasanghika Buddhists, Jain traders, Vedic Brahmins, and Shaka-Yavana settlers. Satavahana inscriptions show grants to all. By avoiding exclusive patronage, the state lowered the risk of sectarian conflict disrupting trade. Cultural policy was economic policy. Pluralistic public spending can be a conflict-reduction instrument.

Delegation also created powerful landed intermediaries. By the 3rd century CE, Ikshvakus and Abhiras asserted independence, often using the same idiom of land-grants. The Satavahana model thus traded short-term efficiency for long-term centrifugal risk. Devolution requires oversight institutions. Without audit and recall, delegation can become fragmentation.

Conclusion

Satavahana inscriptions are archives of administration. They reveal a polity that governed through writing on stone, revenue sharing, and partnerships with society. The empire's economic success rested on the Dakshinapatha trade, and its epigraphic record shows how public policy secured that trade. Free ferries, rest-houses, guild banks, and safe monastic halts, all funded by transparent, publicised grants, reduced costs and increased security for merchants.

Three heuristics emerge from this record. First, disclosure enables delegation. Making fiscal transfers and exemptions public, permanent, and specific allows the state to devolve functions without losing accountability. Second, services can be funded with assets, not only budgets. Endowing institutions with revenue-yielding assets such as land, corpus funds, or toll rights allows service delivery to continue independent of annual allocations. Third, fiscal pluralism supports cohesion. Diverse societies need multi-channel patronage. Funding multiple cultural and social institutions reduces friction and widens state legitimacy.

The Satavahanas did not build a modern state. Yet their inscriptions demonstrate that principles of good administration such as clarity, partnership, and disclosure are not modern inventions. They were carved into the

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Deccan's rock two thousand years ago. Future research should digitise the Satavahana corpus, geotag grant villages, and correlate donative density with archaeological data on trade volume and irrigation. Such work can test whether inscriptional governance causally improved economic outcomes. For now, the epigraphs themselves are the evidence. In ancient India, the rock was the record, and the record was the rule.

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